



AB 297: Wildfire Prevention and Forest Resiliency Act of 2021

SUMMARY

AB 297 takes a comprehensive approach to curbing catastrophic wildfires by providing a stable and continuous source of funding for prevention activities, eliminating regulatory hurdles to completing critical fire prevention projects, and providing incentives to industries which enhance forest health by utilizing wood products.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

California continues to shatter wildfire records as climate change and fuel buildup from years of fire suppression drive powerful mega-fires. The 2020 wildfire season was no exception and California once again set historic records with nearly 10,000 fires burning more than [4.2 million acres](#), making it the largest wildfire season in California's modern history.

Uncontrolled wildfires also undermine California's greenhouse gas reduction goals. Preliminary data from the Air Resources Board estimates wildfires emitted [112 metric tons of CO₂](#) in 2020. The 2018 fires generated 45 million metric tons of carbon--more than [nine times](#) California's combined emission reductions achieved in 2016 and 2017.

Millions of acres of forested lands continue to be vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires due to increased fuel loading, prolonged droughts, and climate change. California is not investing nearly enough to properly manage its forests, and [experts recently called for a sustained \\$2 billion investment](#) for prevention activities.

While funding is a key component to upscaling prevention efforts, California must also increase the pace and scale of projects. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) approval process can take years and [delays critical projects](#).

In 2019, the Governor declared a [state of emergency](#) which waived CEQA requirements for 35 forest management projects. This approach proved successful by fast-tracking projects that would typically take three to five years to complete.

Additionally, private landowners need increased flexibility and resources for managing defensible space around their properties. A current pilot program provides an exemption to Timber Harvest Plan requirements for maintaining defensible space between 150 to 300 feet from a habitable structure. However, this exemption will sunset in 2022.

Finally, California must incentivize innovative use of wood products, as recommended by the California Joint Institute for Wood Products Innovation in their [2020 Biomass Utilization Plan](#). California has 147 million dead and dying trees, and must double forest fuel removal to reduce the risk of wildfires per SB 901 (Dodd, 2018). Current processing capacity cannot meet this demand. Shortage of processing facilities also [hamper clean-up efforts](#) post-fire. Bioenergy, biofuels, biochar and innovative wood products are vital to ensuring these materials can be removed and utilized.

SOLUTION

California needs bold and proactive actions to curb catastrophic wildfires. AB 297 would help California's wildfire prevention efforts and create healthy and resilient forests by:

- Continuously appropriating \$500 million from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund for healthy forest and fire prevention projects

- Providing regulatory relief by exempting from CEQA any projects or activities related to forest health and fuel reduction that involve thinning overgrown brushes or trees 10 inches or less in diameter by mechanical thinning, pile burning, prescribed fire, and grazing
- Deleting the sunset on the Timber Harvest Plan exemption for defensible space and increasing the permissible distance from 300 feet to 500 feet of a legally permitted habitable structure
- Providing incentives to industries that utilize timber products to enhance forest health and resiliency by giving these industries priority under the California Competes Tax Credit program

MORE INFORMATION

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AUTHOR STATEMENT

“The time for incrementalism is over. Catastrophic wildfires have plagued us for years and tragically the 2020 fire season was the worst with over 4.2 million acres burned. Clearly, what we’ve been doing isn’t working. We need bold action and a multi-pronged approach. We know what the problems are. We haven’t made enough progress clearing fuel buildup and managing our forests, red tape and regulatory hurdles continue to increase costs and delay work, and there are few options for processing materials from forest health and fuel reduction projects. AB 297 is a comprehensive approach to addressing these problems.”

SUPPORT

- Butte County Fire Safe Council
- Citizens for Sensible Fire Management
- Madera County
- Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC)